RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES IN THE PUNJAB: THE 'APOSTASY' OF GHAZI MEHMUD DHARAMPAL

ALI USMAN QASMI
UNIVERSITY OF HEIDELBERG
GERMANY

ABSTRACT

This article looks at the contours of the identity formations in Punjab in the context of British colonialism and the apparatuses of administration and patronage, among other tools of modernity, appended to it. The pervasive influence of print medium and discursive 'pigeon-holing' of subject population by administrators, orientalists and missionaries alike has also been taken into cognizance while explaining these processes. Special emphasis, however, is laid on the question of Muslim identity formation which has been brought forth and compared with similar processes at operation among the Hindus and the Sikhs. With emphasis on the particular case of Ghazi Mehmud Dharampal's 'apostasy', the imperative towards the need felt in the Muslim community for cohesive action in protection of religious ideals and projection of Islam suited to the dictates of modern times and amiable to the concerns of 'college graduates', has been highlighted.

KEY WORDS: Ghazi Mehmud Dharampal, British Punjab, Orientalists, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christian Missionaries.

With the annexation of Punjab in 1849 the British proceeded, in accordance with the votaries of selective benevolence espoused by the 'Lawrence school' of colonial administrators of Punjab, to lay down a purportedly paternalistic colonial regime supplemented with an impersonal law system. It was accompanied with the assumption of the responsibility for administering both the civil and criminal justice and a policy of bestowing political favors and economic opportunities on the basis of relative strength of a particular group or community. For this elaborate colonial enterprise to function, the British deemed it mandatory to know their subjects. The newly introduced practice of

'stock-taking' of the subjects by means of census served as an index of the populace defined within the constraining ambit of essentalized categories with ensuing ambiguities sliced off and calcified in the cauldron of Colonialist-Orientalist knowledge archive so as to ensure an abridged understanding – overlooking the complexities of South Asian population and vagaries of its different lifestyles – for the benefit of British administrators entrusted with policy-making and smooth functioning of the empire.[1]

This consideration was even more important for an area like the Punjab marked with plural coexistence. A precarious population balance existed between Muslims and Hindus while Sikhs basked nostalgically in their recently lost glory as the rulers of Punjab and Christians strove hard on the margins to 'claim' this land for Jesus. The strategic significance of Punjab as the single most important recruiting ground of 'martial races' for the Imperial army and its fertile agricultural land with feasible potentialities for an expansion of revenue base, further served to highlight the importance of a stable colonial order and administrative set up in Punjab.

These re-arrangements opened up a whole new range of opportunities and at the same time posed fresh challenges to communities populating Punjab. The ushering in of a new economic-administrative order with British ascendancy concomitantly gave rise to a broad new associational patterning and organizational structuring in realms of social interaction, self-perception and group feeling among the communities. Old modes of interaction crumbled under the weight of socio-political workings of the colonial regime. Alternatively, the British 'offering' of a 'neutral' public space was conceived by them as a competing arena in which communities – constellated on the basis of religion, caste, profession and so on – would vie with each other for prominence while remaining subject to rules of the game specified by the colonial authority. In this way, the colonized were impressed upon with the potential power of the colonizer – both real and perceived but never, in Ranajit Guha's words, hegemonic[2] – to allocate resources, extend patronage and administer law.

As the British were trying to identify their subjects and determine their approximate numbers, it became important for the communities under scrutiny to evolve effective methods of association and organization to reach out to the colonial distributors of resources by capturing a noticeable niche in the public space in order to preclude rival communities from making similar gains.[3] In line with the British mapping of these communities, the members themselves felt entrusted with the task of wearing a uniform outlook by rounding off variances and arbitrarily subsuming otherwise mutable or 'fuzzy'[4] peripheral groups under its fold. This concern for appropriation of identities in a community gave further impetus to the establishment of new groups and guilds on the basis of religion, kinship, caste or other such interests

6

and considerations. An additional source of inspiration was provided by the so-called 'Dalhousian Revolution' whereby emergence of community representative groups not only became possible but was also deemed to be desirable. A better communication infrastructure in the form of well connected railways and efficient postal system could facilitate assemblage of group members and maintenance of regular contacts. The advent of print afforded a new way of broadcasting one's views to a wider audience.

Accompanying these developments was the invasive influence of the Western education system 'proselytized' through government run schools and colleges, which propounded a vague concept of 'rationality' in challenging the tenets of prevalent religious traditions. A perceived threat from the Christian missionaries, operating allegedly in collusion with the British officials at some level, further heightened the mistrust of Punjabis in matters of religion. These Euro-centric canons of rationality and Judeo-Christian forms of 'higher religion' appeared two pronged threats undermining the cohesiveness of a community eventually diminishing its numbers and so bearing an impact on its socio-economic status and political relevance. A cumulative effect of these factors led to a mushrooming of a number of religion-based community groups, especially among the Hindus and Sikhs of Punjab, with a concern for revision of certain aspects of faith for those among their clientele desirous of a more rational interpretation of religion to be self-assured of the superiority of their dogma above that of the others. There was also a pressing need for appropriation of identities so as to forge unity among the community members and swell its ranks in comparison to others. In doing so, these communities were simultaneously being abetted and limited by colonial structures of power and knowledge in place and their actions engendered intertwined chains of reactions from rival communities, hence embroiling them further in competition with one another.

THE BEGINNINGS OF RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES IN PUNJAB

Other than the direct take over of Punjab by the British in 1849, a tangible aspect of the colonial polity was witnessed by the Punjabis in the shape of an enhanced missionary activity since the first launching of proselytizing mission in 1834 in Ludhiana by the American Presbyterians and later by Church Mission Society, Methodist Episcopal Missionaries and others. Within a few decades following the annexation of Punjab, these missions had expanded their work to emerging canal colonies and urban centers of Punjab like Sialkot, Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Gurdaspur, Jehlum and Lyallpur among other areas. The setting up of a printing press in Ludhiana in 1836 by American Presbyterian Mission introduced an alternative and more effective mean of mass dissemination of Christian scriptures printed in

vernaculars throughout Punjab. Between 1861 and 1871 alone the Ludhiana press had published 31 editions of Christian scriptures in Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi numbering 188,000 copies in total, along with 286 tracts and books with a total print numbering 1,346,675 copies.[5] Other than that, the missionaries established a number of educational institutes and hospitals in Punjab. The earliest missionary educational institution for boys was opened at Kotgarh near Simla in 1843 by Church Missionary Society. The American Mission followed by establishing its first English medium school at Jallandur in 1848 and in Lahore the next year.[6] Forman Christian College Lahore (formerly Lahore Mission College) and Murray College Sialkot emerged as two important centers for western learning in Punjab during the late nineteenth century run by the Christian Missions.

Mission schools and hospitals, along with freely available missionary literature in vernaculars, facilitated the missionary activity in Punjab and allowed reaching out to especially those among the local communities condemned as outcastes – most importantly the *Chūhŕās* or the sweepers in the context of mission influence in Punjab – for the menial and lowly occupations they were associated with.[7] The results were startling for the missionaries themselves: a 410% increase in Christian population of Punjab was witnessed as their total numbers swelled to 19,750 in 1891. By 1911, their population had risen up to 163,994.[8]

The conversion of even outcaste 'members' of a religious community was significant in over all impact since it diminished the total numbers of a community in the census reports, and suggested a lack of egalitarian-rational spirit in their religious doctrines and absence of organizational apparatuses to prevent the conversions from taking place. Successful missionary attempts to prey upon learned and influential members of the communities was a further source of embarrassment as the local religious traditions in their existing forms appeared unable to rationally satisfy the concerns of western educated 'graduates'. Events like the attempted *en masse* conversion of Sikh students of Amritsar Mission School in 1873 or baptism in 1894 of Maulvī Hāfiz Nabī Bakhsh of Muslim High School Amritsar, were of even more significance than the decennial publication of census reports. These cases helped to generate a lot of debate in the local press and added to the intensity of polemical disputations taking place throughout Punjab between the clerics of different faiths. The high-profile converts helped project the image of Christian successes in establishing itself as a viable alternative in Punjab and, more importantly, a form of 'higher' religion more suitable to the concerns of a humane and informed believer.

The challenge posed by Christianity to local religious traditions of Punjab clearly demanded similar organizational responses along with modifications in some matters of faith to chalk out a

successful counter-strategy for proselytization. In the context of Punjab, establishment of Āryā Samāj in 1875 by Svāmī Dayānand (d. 1883) was indicative of a significant development in the religious traditions, especially Hinduism, as believed and practiced in Punjab. Dayānand tried to configure Hinduism closely to the dictates of a colonized polity and socio-religious traditions espoused by the missionary groups. The key point in Dayānand's idea of a reformed Hinduism under the auspices of Āryā Samāj was an emphasis on the Vedas as the bearer of central authority and authentic source of guidance for Hindu religion. This assertion in the centrality of Vedas served as Dayānand's vision of a standardized Hindu belief system and canonized ritual practices – in comparison to and a complete disregard for the hoary sets of disparate beliefs and diverse practices of Hindus in the vast stretches of South Asia – to which one could refer to or proselytize to add new converts into its fold. In doing so Dayānand was cognizant of the need to rely on Vedas as an authentic textual representation of the Hindu religion as a counter to the established scriptural representation of religions like Islam and Christianity.[9] In Dayānand's opinion,

> The Vedic truth as it existed in its pure form in the ancient past, unadulterated by latter day indigenous or foreign influences, was to be retrieved and emphasized as true Hindu faith. All must read the truth in its pure Vedic form and should the Vedas prove difficult to comprehend then Arya literature stood ready to explain and interpret them.[10]

Other than complying with the tradition of textual representation as in Semitic religions, Svāmī Dayānand went further to rid Hinduism of its 'polytheistic' aspects targeted by the missionaries by arguing for an adherence to a rather monotheistic concept of a single, all-powerful deity.[11] An additional pressure emanating from the missionaries and other rival religious communities with which Āryā Samāj had to cope with were certain 'objectionable' teachings and ideas which were being attributed to Hinduism. Earlier Ram Mohan Roy had sorted a way out by distinguishing between "real Hindooism" and the superstitious practices that deformed the "Hindoo religion" and had nothing to do with the "pure spirit of its dictates." In his quest for a more reasonable alternative to superstitious and Brahnamic dominated, ritualized Hinduism, Ram Mohan Roy ended up scrapping everything except Vedas and Upanishads, which he decreed to be the core of Hindu tradition, which in turn created a precedent for a later foregrounding of the Vedas by Svāmī Dayānand.[12] But Ram Mohan Roy's successor Dēvendrānāth Tagore found the 'idolatrous teachings' of Vedas incongruent with his own perceptions of a Supreme Being or Deity and

abandoned it as the basis of religious authority for members of Tattvabodhini Sabha and Brāhmo Samāj, to be replaced by reason and nature.[13] On the other extreme were Sanātan Dharmī groups who accorded canonical stature not only to Vedas but also Purānās, Tāntras and a host of other Hindu devotional literature to argue in favor of more traditional form of Hinduism.

Svāmī Dayānand's belief in the Vedas as the eternal and infallible word of God as true representation of Hinduism required that all additional Hindu scriptures or devotional literatures should be summarily dismissed insofar as they contradicted the teachings of Vedas, and thus remove any vulnerability to scathing criticism of missionaries, non-Āryā Hindus and other religious groups. As for the alleged polytheism, brahmanized rituals and traces of an asymmetrical caste society envisaged in Vedic texts, Svāmī Dayānand resorted to a revisionist reading of these texts to make them conform to his scheme of a monotheistic and de-brahmanized Hindu religion with an egalitarian outlook. In this endeavor a reinterpretation of certain Vedic passages was as important as questioning the scriptural authority of Purānās and other such texts.[14]

After having established Hinduism as derived from the teachings of Vedas, it became possible to proselytize it as a distinct religion as Āryā Samāj's arbitrarily constructed uniform Hindu dogma and reductive understanding of its various aspects narrowed down the definition of a Hindu to a person believing in the teachings of Vedas. The undertaking of evangelical missions was not just to apprise the Hindus about 'true doctrines' of their faith but was also demanded by political expediencies and economic compulsions. There was a growing anxiety among the Āryā Samājīs – and most of the other Hindu groups or movements that cropped up during this period – about dwindling numbers of the Hindus as suggested by census reports. The weakening of 'Hindu race' and decline in its numbers was understood as a phenomenon that had been in progress since the advent of Muslim rule in South Asia and speeded up under the British.

With the teachings of Svāmī Dayānand serving as a rallying cry for a reformed, Vedic-only Hinduism and Āryā Samāj being used as a platform and representative Hindu organization to propagate this new form of Hindu faith – a reversal of the conversion process was sought by targeting an audience comprising mainly of non-Ārya Samājī Hindus or those who had converted to other religions, along with Muslims and Christians.[15] That the proselytizing of Hindu religion was a pioneering accomplishment on the part of Svāmī Dayānand and Āryā Samāj is evident from the fact that traditionally Hinduism had lacked a conversion ritual but the perception of a decline in the numbers of Hindus in Punjab was a stimulus powerful enough to allow for novel methods of initiating new members into the fold of Hinduism. One such ritual was Shuddhī or purification. One of the first reported

Shuddhī was performed by Svāmī Dayānand in 1877 to a Hindu of Jallundar who had converted to Christianity.[16] The earliest known Shuddhī of a Muslim dates back to the same year. A Muslim from Dehra Dun was administered with conversion rites by Dayānand and given a Hindu name of Alakhdhārī.[17] On the whole, Āryā Samāj's efforts met with moderate success as their numbers grew steadily to reach 92,419 in 1901[18] though it fell drastically short of a figure desired by them. The organizational expansion of Āryā Samāj was, however, more impressive as their affiliated branches spread widely to different parts of India It was able to establish schools and colleges imparting Vedic and modern education.

One of the communities most affected by the religious controversies plaguing Punjab, especially the ones waged by Āryā Samāj, was that of Sikhs. They not only had to cope with their recent loss of political authority in Punjab but also negotiate with threats to their existence as a separate religious entity. The Sikhs, like others, were being beset by the efforts of missionaries aimed at bringing about large scale conversions, and, in addition, faced an increasingly offensive challenge from the Āryā Samājīs to subsume them under the category of Hinduism for religious and numerical purposes. The Āryā Samājī literature was critical of revered Sikh figures including Baba Guru Nanak but at the same time emphasized the mutual religio-spiritual ancestry of the two religions in various tracts published and public disputations held. Further encroachments were made by Āryā Samājis during the Shuddhī campaign of 1890's when Sikhs, mostly from the lower-castes, were converted to Hinduism in public ceremonies of conversion with rituals involving cutting of hairs – a sacrilegious act in Sikhism. A similar effort, albeit at a much lesser scale and mostly as an exercise in academics, was made by individual Muslims who tried to present Baba Guru Nanak as a Muslim by citing 'credible historical evidences' in this regard.

In response to their opponent's exploitation of vaguely defined contours of Sikh religion and certain aspects of its teachings, there were varied interpretations of Sikh religious traditions by its adherents. In pre-1849 Punjab, there had already started a process of religious reform among the Sikhs as groups such as the Nirankārīs and Namdhārīs strove to revitalize Sikhism's devotional spirit among the believers in their own different ways.[19] But it was the post -1849 period that witnessed a rapid growth of Sikh organizations named as Singh Sabhās which dealt with various questions facing the community by providing infrastructural groundings to promote a Sikh identity in accordance with their respective differentiated understandings of the Sikh tradition.

The first Sabhā was established in Amritsar in 1873. The purported aim of the organization was to restore the purity and glory of Sikhism by bringing about awareness among the Sikhs with the publication of books, tracts and journals. The Lahore Singh Sabhā

which held its first meeting in 1879 had a similar agenda but with a more reformist and egalitarian outlook. The Lahore and Amritsar sabhās, along with dozens of such organizations established in most parts of Punjab, briefly allowed themselves to be jointly overseen by a larger central body of Khālsa Dīvān established in 1883 to be replaced by Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902. By 1900 there were more than one hundred Singh Sabhas in Punjab and neighboring areas without there being unanimity among them on the question of defining a Sikh and determining Sikh religious traditions. They approached questions regarding idolatry, female education and caste system in accordance with their readings of the Sikh scriptures.

The issue of Sikhism's relation to Hinduism clearly seemed to be settling in favor of those championing a distinct Sikh identity to the loss of those who concurred with Āryā Samājīs and other Hindus in seeing Sikhism as an offshoot of a broadly defined Hinduism and derived from commonly respected scriptural sources. This was made possible by organizations a Tract Society founded in 1894 which regularly publishedsuch as Khāls didactic and polemical literature, evidenced by references from Sikh scriptures, to emphasize the non-Hindu nature of Sikhism.[20] Moreover, the efforts undertaken by Professor Gurmukh Singh (d. 1898) and Bhā'ī Kahām Singh (d. 1938) in locating and publishing old texts, exploring hitherto unknown local biographies of Guru Nanak (*Janam Sakhīs*) and ascertaining the relative credibility of these sources helped add to the confidence of the Sikhs in the veracity and richness of their religious literature and textually recorded documentation of its history. Research and publication bodies affiliated with Singh Sabhās ensured that authentic editions of Janam Sakhīs and Adī Granth were brought out.[21] In this way Singh Sabhā led initiatives for Sikhs resulted in the sharpening of a recognizable Sikh identity, afforded an organizational framework leading to the establishment of a number of schools and colleges for Sikhs, and opened up debate on various aspects of Sikh traditions in order to render it dogmatically compatible with the socio-religious milieu of colonial Punjab and shrug off attempts by rival communities to undermine the belief system and practices of Sikhism. From the plurality of views that emerged from these discourses on Sikhism, the British, however, gave credence and extended a Sikhs – who tallied withpatronage to a rather militaristic variant of Khāls projected image of the Sikhs as one of the 'martial races' of Punjab – for their own administrative conveniences and fulfillment of colonialist objectives.

MUSLIM REACTION TO RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES IN PUNJAB

The Muslim reaction to the religious controversies in Punjab was different insofar as it did not involve a significant effort to resolve the problematic of their distinct religious identity vis-à-vis Hindus and

Sikhs. This does not, however, suggest that the Muslims of Punjab constituted a monolithic community or that religion alone defined their identity or determined the contours of community consciousness. Muslims too were a religious group constructed or perceived in the colonial logbooks as a community shot through with class, regional, linguistic, sectarian and individual differences.[22] Therefore, Muslims too were similarly cognizant of the dilemmas and challenges posed by colonial polity and socio-economic changes accompanying it, and faced the brunt of opposition from rival religious communities, especially Āryā Samājīs. The dynamics of their politics and discourse on the idea of 'reform' in religion was not so dissimilar from the rest. A number of voluntary organizations patronized by Muslim nobility and professionals came into existence to support modern and religious education of Muslims by building schools and colleges.[23] They also became actively involved in religious disputations and wrote polemical tracts[24] in order to forestall sporadic encroaching attempts to baptize the Muslims or to cajole them back to their 'original' Hindu roots.

Apart from missionaries who posed a 'common' threat to the local religious traditions of Punjab, Muslim religious rhetoric with regard to Hindus was noticeably more strained. A number of mutually acrimonious tracts were exchanged after the publication of Maulvī Ismā'īl's *Radd-i Hunūd* from Bombay followed by Maulvī 'Ubaydullāh, a Hindu convert to Islam, who wrote *Tuhfa tul-Hind* in 1874.[25] It was responded to by Munshī Indarman in his tract *Tuhfa tul-Islām* published from Muradabad. A total of at least 15 tracts were exchanged between the contesting sides.[26] As this trend flourished, Svāmī Dayānand joined the fray by writing *Satyārath Parkāsh* whose contents were considered potentially offensive to Muslim sensitivities regarding their religion. The fourteenth chapter of Dayānand's book focusing on the Quran and some aspects of Islamic teachings was meant as an academic exercise in belittling the genuineness of non-Hindu religions to underline their untenability as a universal religion so as to reiterate the credibility of Vedas as divine scriptures relevant to the dictates of modern times. In case of the Quran, Dayānand criticized its teachings which allegedly sanction violence, killing of non-believers, sexual promiscuity, moral laxities, and encourage a certain kind of idolatry by centralizing the importance of the Ka'ba in prayer and pilgrimage performances. He concludes his criticism by saying that Quran is neither the Book of God nor does it even qualify as the work of an erudite scholar.[27] Muslim scholars responded in kind by raising objections against Vedas and drawing 'evidence' from its text to prove that the charges leveled against Quran can more appropriately be leveled against Vedas for its treatment of the same issues in an even more inhumane and irrational manner.[28] Dayānand's Vedic solution of *Niyoga* (levirate) to the question of widow remarriage was, in particular, repeatedly exploited by his opponents, often with ridicule

13

and satire, as an example of Veda's crass sexuality and hence a valid proof of its un-divine nature.

The religious debate had, hence, boiled down to an enumeration of scriptural authorities of competing religions on the basis of their historical veracity, rational compatibility and universal appeal. This trend invited fiery responses from competing religions. Lēkh Rām (d. 1897), an Āryā Samājī proselytizer, aggravated the religious controversies by penning provocative literature against Islam and its Prophet. In doing so he was mad – the founderresponding to a spate of similar writings by Mirzā Ghulām Ah madīya movement generally denounced by rest of the Muslims asof messianic Ah heretical – and other Muslim polemicists. In dealings with his Muslim rivals, Lēkh Rām was concerned less about proving Vedas as the central exponent of Hinduism than to disqualify the Quran as a divine text in accordance with criterion laid down by him. According to that criterion a Book had to be devoid of supernatural events contrary to human reason and partiality towards any particular community or group of followers in order to qualify the status of divinity.[29] In addition to lacking a rational and universalistic spirit, Quran was considered by Lēkh Rām as historically less credible than the Vedas. Lēkh Rām built this argument on the basis of reports found in both Sunnī and Shī'a Ahādīth to the effect that parts of Quranic text had been lost. In the same vein Lēkh Rām's portrayal of Islam as a religion of murder, theft, slavery and perverse sexual acts[30] is derived from traditionally revered Muslim texts of classical exegesis and other juridical-theological writings. When reminded by his Muslim counterparts of sexual indulgences of Krishan with *gopīs* and vanities of various Hindu rituals, Lēkh Rām discounted the criticism by reemphasizing the Āryā doctrine of dissociation from non-Vedic Hindu texts.

THE 'APOSTASY' OF GHĀZĪ MEḤMŪD DHARAMPĀL (D. 1960)

In order for newly emerged groups to claim credence as true representatives of their respective religions and boost the confidence of their followers in the articles of faith expounded by them, it was necessary to make efforts – other than just arguing in terms of historicity of the sacred text or its rational-universalistic teachings – for mass conversions into the fold of one's religion or to strive for cases of high-profile conversions. In the latter case such individuals could then be taken around and presented during religious disputations and publicized through journals and newspapers as living examples of the successful efforts made by the group for the promotion of religion and in establishing its genuineness.

One such case of high-profile conversion, which in case of Āryā Samāj considerably substantiated their credibility and exemplified the success of their proselytizing efforts in favor of Hindu religion, was

that of Ghāzī Meḥmūd Dharampāl's adoption of Hinduism. Ghāzī Meḥmud's original name was 'Abdul Ghafur. He was born in Hoshiarpur in 1882. During his formative years he developed a skeptical outlook regarding Islam and undertook a comparative study of religions to arrive at the true one. What weakened his previously staunch belief in Islam was an incident during the early years of his life. According to Ghāzī Meḥmūd, he once listened to a Friday prayer sermon in which the speaker said that true believers are blessed with a magnificent vision in the last days of the Muslim holy month of Ramażan. Ghazı Meḥmud studiously observed his prayers and spent sleepless night in the hope of receiving such a vision. Failing to receive one, he became skeptical and as a way of soul searching he started reading the biographies and teachings of reformers, saints and prophets.[31] This religious introspection brought him closer, at first, to Dēv Samājīs.[32] They, in turn, supported Ghāzī Meḥmūd by financing his academic pursuits as well. By 1899, Ghāzī Meḥmūd had ceased to be a practicing Muslim as shown by his letters in which he wrote Dharampāl with his name and greeted his brother with a *namastē*.[33] He remained a Dev Samajı, and registered himself as one in the census, at least till 1901 before shunning contact with them on the account of their alleged malpractices and false beliefs. His opponents, however, accused him of making the switch for he had lost ground both among the Muslims and Dev Samajıs, and needed financial support for himself.[34] When Ghazı Meḥmud came into contact with Ārya Samajıs while he was serving as a school teacher in Gujranwala, he showed his inclination towards embracing Hinduism after being convinced of the truthfulness of the Aryan principles of religion. By 1903, Ghāzī Meḥmūd had turned twenty-one and so there could be no legal bar on him to formally declare his renunciation of Islam and initiation into Hinduism, and change his name from 'Abdul Ghafur to Dharampal. But Ghazı Meḥmud objected to the term Shuddhı being used for his conversion to Hinduism because it implied that he was being transformed from a ritual state of impurity to that of purity. With some reluctance the Arya Samajı organizers of the event acquiesced to his demands and a mutually acceptable term of *pardēsh* (entry) was adopted. Also, Ghāzī Meḥmūd did not want to allow shaving of his head as part of the conversion ritual. A failure to do that would have embarrassed the Āryā Samājis in the eyes of their rival Hindu sects. A compromise was reached whereby Ghāzī Meḥmūd was to wear a turban in order to cover his hair.[35] The whole event was publicized well in advance so as to attract maximum attention and continued to be trumpeted in the press as the living example of Āryā Samāj's successful representation of Hinduism. It was a rather theatrical display of ritual performances orchestrated by Āryā Samājīs with Ghāzī Meḥmūd playing his part of the script by reading out a lengthy lecture against the teachings of Islam.

Ghāzī Meḥmūd's charge sheet against Islam in his lecture titled *Tark-ı Islām* (Renunciation of Islam)[36] was a reiteration of the critique made by Svami Dayanand. It followed Dayanand's format of quoting a Quranic verse and criticizing the content or injunction of that verse with satirical comments. His main thrust of argument against Quran rested mostly on the concepts regarding God, cosmology, supernaturalism, rights of women, Jihad and the Hereafter described in its text.

In addition to that he wrote a number of other monographs criticizing the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad, especially his private life, along with numerous other aspects of Islam. In his writings, Ghazı Mehmud does not figure as an astute scholar of Islam or that of its classical texts. In many instances his understanding of the Quran is either simplistic or out rightly flawed though still effective in raising doubts among the believers with limited knowledge of the scripture. His works were equally important for those among the Āryā Samāj who sought reaffirmation of the superiority of their own faith with the testimony of a former Muslim. In consequence, despite the evidently flawed reasoning and deficient knowledge in Ghazı Mehmūd's works, they were widely challenged by numerous Muslim scholars. In all, no less than thirty books were written in response to different works of Ghāzī Mehmūd.[37] Most prominent among them were the monographs penned by Thana'ullah Amritsarı, the fiery Ahl-i Ḥadıth polemicist and editor of weekly *Ahl-ı Ḥadīth*, and Ḥakım Nur ud-Dīn, the leader of Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad's Aḥmadīya Jamā't after his death. Both were trained religious scholars with years of experience in polemical disputations with rival Muslims sects as well as the Hindus. Thanā'ullāh Amritsarī, especially, had a thorough understanding of the Hindu scriptures as well.[38] Thana'ullah Amritsarı rebutted Ghazı Mehmud's objections by two means: First, he pointed out the flaws in his counterpart's understanding of the Quranic text by citing the rules of Arabic grammar and other lexicographical references;[39] second, Thanā'ullāh compared the Quranic verses deemed objectionable by Ghazı Mehmud with corresponding references from Vedas to either emphasize the similarity between the two regarding a particular injunction or to justify the excellence and practicality of former's ruling over and above that of latter's in dealing with some issue discussed by both.[40] The same was done by Ḥakim Nūr ud-Dīn in his treatise against Ghāzī Meḥmūd Dharampāl.

Ghazı Mehmud remained actively involved in the activities of Āryā Samāj and regularly visited the religious gatherings and polemics organized by them. He even published his own journal *Indar* to propagate Āryā Samājī Hinduism. His association with Āryā Samāj gradually came to an end after his marriage to a Brahman widow Gayān Dēvī. The marriage raised opposition for it was concluded between a non-Brahman with a widow senior to him in age. Since his

marriage with Gayān Dēvī was not sanctioned by Āryā Samāj nor was there an assurance of respectable status for his children borne by her, Ghazı Meḥmud published and widely circulated an appeal to scholars of all religions asking if their religion could guarantee the rights of his wife and children without discrimination.[41] In response, Qāżī Sulaymān Manṣūrpūrī (d. 1930) – a learned Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholar and a session judge in the princely state of Patiala – wrote back to him declaring that the couple was lawfully wedded and their children had equal rights in every aspect even if their mother chose to remain Hindu. Such a positive response prompted Ghazı Meḥmud to visit Qażı Sulaymān and reembrace Islam in 1914.[42]

From 1914 onwards Ghazı Meḥmud Dharampal took out a number of journals and was actively involved against the Ārya Samajıs during the Shuddhı campaigns of 1920's. But even though he became a Muslim, his understanding of the religion remained unconventional as he tilted toward the Ahl al-Qur'ān – especially in his views on Aḥādīth which are denounced by him for depicting Prophet's sexual life with graphic details.[43] He also found fault with the approach of 'Ulāmā' in insisting on a strict adherence to minute details prescribed by Sunnat for ritual observances of Islam. He considered it unnecessary to perform ablution or follow any schematic ritual order for the offering of prayers. The Quran, according to him, allowed a believer to offer prayer at any appointed time and in any order deemed fit by him. That Allah Himself had refrained from specifying the details of Namaz was taken by him as evidence of their insignificance.[44] This clearly shows proximity of his new ideas about Islam with those of some Ahl al-Qur'ān groups, especially the one founded by Khvāja Aḥmad ud-Dīn Amritsarī. It is no wonder then that Ahl al-Qur'ān groups claimed Ghazı Meḥmud Dharampal as one of their members and that his 'apostasy' came to an end because of a monograph[45] written by Maulvı 'Abdullah Chakŕalavı (d. 1916) – the founder of Ahl al-Qur'an movement in Lahore and the first person in modern Muslim history to denounce the Ḥadīth literature in total.

CONCLUSION

The present article has been an attempt to introduce the figure of Ghazı Mehmud Dharampal and underscore the importance of his act of apostasy in the context of Colonial Punjab's raging religious polemics and controversies. After his re-admission to Islam, Dharampal's career as a polemicist took a new turn as he assumed for himself the duty of responding to the challenge of Hindu extremist groups that cropped up in the 1920's calling for the mass re-conversion of Muslims into Hinduism or the outright expulsion of its population from the Indian soil. In the differentiated socio-economic context of the 1920's, Dharampal's prolific corpus of writings – including both monographs

and pamphlets   assumed considerable significance in meeting the proselytizing challenge of Hinduism and adding to the simmering communal tensions of that period. This, however, demands a whole different study altogether. It is hoped that the present article would arouse enough curiosity for further research in the person of Ghazi Mehmud and his writings and enlarge upon our understanding of the discourses of communalism and religious polemics of 20th century Punjab.

END-NOTES

' Kenneth W Jones has described the census as providing "a new conceptualization of religion as a community, an aggregate of individuals united by a formal definition and given characteristics based on qualified data Religions became communities mapped, counted, and above all compared with other religious communities." Kenneth W. Jones, "Religious Identity and the Indian Census" in Gerald Barrier, ed. *Census in British India: New Perspectives* (New Delhi, 1981). p, 84.

² Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge Harvard university Press 1998)

³ Guha's critiques such an overarching, all-pervasive conceptualization of colonial power structure as an elitist, neo-colonialist 'Cambridge School' of historiography since it reduces history to the study of native responses to Imperialist stimuli. It endows the imperial government alone with the initiative that defines the structure and movement of politics while the colonized are denied having any will of their own They are simply described as slotting into a framework made for them by their rulers by replicating their institutional patterns to benefit, as clients, from their patrons in the form of jobs, titles, agricultural land and canal water *Ibid*. p, 85 Even though Guha is rightly critical of the underlying assumptions of such an approach to history, its usefulness, nevertheless, in the understanding of colonial set up as envisioned by its framers and its reception by the traditional landed aristocracy, newly emerging elite groups, members of services sector and those from trading classes co-opted into a symbiotic relationship with the empire – cannot be set aside. In other words, the purpose is to outline the conceptual framework of British Colonialism's *paternalism* in Punjab without denying agency or initiative to various sections of the Punjabi population. Events, figures, political and religious groups whether bourgeoisie or subaltern resisting British colonialism and operating beyond the immediacy of patron-client relationship on their own initiative, are too numerous, mass-based and influential in disrupting the homogenizing tendencies of this narrative that they cannot be subdued, silenced, ignored or overlooked Studies concerned with the dynamics of identity formation in colonial Punjab, while giving primacy to the role played by colonialism and its apparatuses, have nevertheless located these processes in pre-Colonial history and have invested the agency in the communities themselves as makers of their own identity Two important studies in this regard are: Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (New Delhi, 1994); Nonica Datta, *Forming an Identity: A Social History of the Jats* (New Delhi, 1999)

⁴ For further elaboration of the concept of 'fuzzy' communities, cf Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India", in Partha Chatterjee, and Gyanendra Pandey, eds. *Subaltern Studies VII. Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi, 1993), pp 20-6 Kaviraj does not deny the existence of communities based on an idea of identity in pre-modern social forms On the contrary, he argues that the sense of community feeling was usually more intense than those of modern societies. Yet he justifies the description of these communities as 'fuzzy' because they had vague boundaries and, unlike modern communities, were not enumerated The enumeration of fuzzy communities, by

19

census and other means along with the imperative of 'nation-formation', transformed these identities into choate, focused and organized entities during the colonial period. Scholars like Sumit Sarkar, Gyanendra Pandey and Sandria Freitag, arguing from their respective perspectives, have offered similar explanations for the process of identity formation during the colonial period. C. A. Bayly, on the other hand, has traced the historical formation of religious identities from the pre-colonial period. Cited in Datta, *Social History of the Jats* (New Delhi, 1999), p.3.

[5] Jeffery Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India* (Stanford, 2002) p, 56. Overall in Punjab the number of printing press increased by over 70% between 1864 and 1883 with a five fold cumulative increase in the number of books published between 1875 and 1880. Ian Talbot, *India and Pakistan* (London, 2000), p. 60.

[6] Om Parkash Kaushal, *The Radha Soami Movement: 1891-1997* (Jalandhar, 1998), p.12. The *zenana* or female wing of the Christian missions made available similar opportunities for western learning to the women of Punjab by opening a number of schools.

[7] The Church Mission Society first reported the spread of *Chūhŕā* conversion movement into the area they 'occupied' in 1884-85. From their main centre of activity in Sialkot, it reached south to Narowal and from Gurdaspur south into the Batala Tehsil. Cf. John C. B. Webster, "Christian Conversion in Punjab: What has Changed?" in Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke (eds.), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings* (New Delhi, 2003), p.363.

[8] Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: The Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Punjab* (New Delhi, 1989), p.10.

[9] What facilitated such an approach was the publication of an 'authentic' edition of Vedas edited by Max Müller and later by other of his colleagues in Germany as part of modernity's project to textually represent the 'East' in correct texts and exact translations, and a matching desire on the part of Hindu scholars to have scripturally authoritative texts like Islam and Christianity. As Peter van der Veer notes: "If 'history' and 'nation' are only possible in the presence of the written printed word, then it is quite understandable that the orality of Hindu traditions was a 'national' embarrassment for Indian scholars who were confronted with the comparison with the West." Peter Van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, 2001), pp.119-20.

[10] Jones, *Arya Dharm*, p. 33.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[12] Uma Chakaravati, "Whatever happened to the Vedic *Dasi*? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past" in Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State* (New Delhi, 1994), p. 34.

[13] Geoffery A. Oddie, "Constructing 'Hinduism': the Impact of Protestant Missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding" in Robert Eric Frykenberg, ed. *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500* (London, 2003), p.176. A similar approach was adopted by Pandit Shiv Narayan Agnihotri when he founded Dev Samaj in 1887. But soon he deviated from these doctrines to introduce a dual worship of himself and God in 1892. Three years later the worship of God was dispensed

with. Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (New Delhi, repr. 2003), p. 105.

[14] This technique was carried forward by his disciples, most notably Svāmi Sharaddhānand kī Nāpāk Ta'līm sē Bacho' (Save Yourself From(d. 1926). In his book 'Purānon the Unholy Teachings of Purānās), Sharaddhānand deals with the issue of true sources of Hinduism by questioning the validity of Purānās. In his method of *quellenkritik* Sharaddhānand discredits a particular Purānā – for example Bhavishya – with the historical proof for its very recent composition. He argues that far from being the work of the ancient rishī Vyāsā, it was written in the middle of the 17th century as shown by its material which he found to be offensive to reason and morality. For more details about the life and works of Swami Sharaddhānand, cf. J.T.F. Jordens, *Swami Sharaddhananda, his Life and Causes* (New Delhi, 1981), p. 61.

[15] Other than publishing journals and newspapers, and translating Sanskrit text into vernaculars, Āryā Samājīs also developed a system of paid missionaries called Updēshaks. Kenneth W. Jones, "The Arya Samaj in British India, 1857-1947" in Robert D. Baird (ed.), *Religion in Modern India*. p.33.

[16] J.T.F. Jorden, "Reconversion to Hinduism: the Shuddhī of the Arya Samaj", in G. A. Oddie (ed.), *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times* (New Delhi, 1991), p. 216.

[17] There were attempts to target not just individuals but groups of Muslims to bring about mass conversions – especially among 'Neo-Muslims'. The first actual attempt of mass Shuddhī of Muslim converts is said to have been made at Deeg in the Bharatpur state in eastern Rajputana. Yoginder Sikand, "Arya Shuddhī and Muslim Tabligh: Muslim Reactions to Arya Samaj Proselytization (1923-30)" in Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke (eds.), *Religious Conversion*, pp.101-02.

[18] Jones, "The Arya Samaj in British India", p.35.

[19] For these reasons, Harjot Oberoi, in his study of Sikh identity formation, does not "single out the colonial state as an instrument for stamping Sikhism with a new consciousness and altered symbolic universe". But he does admit that the Sikh identity was gradually crystallized into an impermeable one during the colonial period only. Oberoi, *Construction of Religious Boundaries*, pp. 371-2.

[20] Norman Gerald Barrier, "The Singh Sabhas and the Evolution of Modern Sikhism, 1875-1925" in Robert D. Baird, ed. *Religion in Modern India*, p. 204. One of the classic expositions of distinct Sikh identity was Bhā'ī Kāhn Singh's best known works titled ' *HaynHum Hindū Nahīn*,' (We are not Hindus). A conscious effort was made by Singh Sabha movements to dissociate themselves from Muslims – with whom they shared a monotheistic concept of God and much of Punjab's Sufi poetry – by supporting such acts as purposefully slaughtering the animals in a way different to that of the Muslims.

[21] Norman G. Barrier, *The Sikhs and their Literature: A Guide to Tracts, Books and Periodicals, 1849-1919* (Delhi, 1970), p. xxi.

[22] Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in Islam since 1850* (London, 2000), p. 41.

[23] For details about these organizations and mad Sa'īd,associations, cf. Ahmad Saeed, *Musalmanān-i Panjāb kī Samājī aur Falāhi Anjumanayn : Ēk Tajziyātī Mutala* (Lahore, 2004).

[24] Of 70-80,000 books and pamphlets published in Punjab between 1867-1914, 25-30,000 were written by Muslims or published by them to meet the needs of the community in defending or proselytizing its religion. Edward Churchill, "Printed Literature of the Punjabi Muslims, 1860-1900" in W. Eric Gustafson and Kenneth W. Jones, eds. *Sources on Punjab History* (New Delhi, 1975) p, 257. These also included books with intra-religious debates among the Muslims – especially between Ahl-i Hadith and Hanafis.

[25] Maulāna 'Ubayd Ullāh Sindhī (d. 1945) – a noted Deobandī cleric – is reported to have accepted Islam after reading this tract. He was born as a Sikh.

[26] Lēkh Rām, *Kulīyāt-i Āryā Musāfir* (Lahore, 1897), p. 626. For details, Cf. Gustafson and Jones (eds.), *Punjab History*.

[27] Svāmī Dayānand, *Satyārath Parkāsh*, trans. Vandematharam Ramachandra Rao as *Spot-Light on Truth: Swami Dayanand's Satyaratha Parkash in English with Comments* (Hyderabad, 1988), p. 78.

[28] Though written much after Svāmī Dayānand's death, Thanā'ullāh Amritsarī's *Haqq Parkāsh bajavāb Satyārath Parkāsh* (Lahore, repr. 2001) published in 1900 can be cited as one of the most important anti-Āryā Samājī work that continued to be relevant in the Hindu-Muslim debates, especially during the Shuddhī movement of 1920's.

[29] Lēkh Rām, *Kulīyāt,* p. 636.

[30] This description of Islam by Lēkh Rām is to be found in his most controversial tract published in 1892 titled *Risāla-i Jihād ya'nī Dīn-i Muhammadī kī Bunyād* (Lahore, 1892). Even missionary newspaper *Nūr Afshān* commented disfavourably about it due to the apprehension that it could further heighten the feelings of hostility between the members of the two communities. Spencer Lavan, *The Ahmadiyah Movement: A History and Perspective* (New Delhi, 1974), p.76. This prediction of worsening of communal harmony and the 'prophecy' about Lēkh Rām's disgraceful death was materializedmade by Mirzā Ghulām Ahmad when Lēkh Rām was assassinated by some unknown assailant in 1897.

[31] Ghāzī Mehmūd Dharampāl, *Dāstān-i Gham* (Lahore, 1954), pp. II, 85.

[32] Dēv Samāj was started by a former Brahmo Samāj activist of Punjab, Pandit Shiv Narā'in Agnīhotrī, who described his religious doctrines as "in Harmony with Facts and Laws of Nature and based on the Evolution or Dissolution of Man's Life-Power." Dēv Samāj "combined positivist ideas of the evolution of society and knowledge in stages with a deep veneration and worship of Pandit Agnihotri." Gyan Parkash, "Science Between the Lines" in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds. *Subaltern Studies IX* (New Delhi, 1996), p. 73.

[33] Muhammad Ishāq Bhattī, "Ghāzī Mehmūd Dharampāl" in *Al-Ay'tasām* (Lahore) pp,55, 23(June 2003), pp, 28-9.

[34] Such accusations were made against him by Dēv Ratnā in a tract titled *Dēv Samāj kā 'Abdul Ghafūr aur Āryā Samāj kā Dharampāl* and Lālā Lachman Dās's *Dharampāl kī Khudkushī.* Cited in Qāsim 'Alī Ahmadī, *Shuddhī kī Ashuddhī* (Delhi, 1909), pp. 4 - 64.

[35] Bhattī, *al-Ay'tasām* pp, 55, 25 (June 2003), p.14. With communal tension running high, a precautionary measure was taken by the Āryā Samājīs to send

Ghāzī Meḥmūd to a secure Vedic Āshram to avoid any unpleasant incident. Dharampāl, *Dāstān-i Gham*, pp. II- 165.

[36] Dharampāl, *Tark-i Islām* (Gujranwala, 1903)

[37] Thanā'ullāh Amritsarī, *Turk-i Islām*, (Amritsar, repr. 1918), p. 6.

[38] As noted earlier, Thanā'ullāh Amritsarī had responded to Svāmī Dayānnad's work as well and had alluded to various Hindu scriptures in his response. Ghāzī Meḥmūd too, in his late writings, acknowledged that he found it impossible to counter the arguments put forward by Thanā'ullāh Amritsarī.

[39] An interesting example of that is found in the discussion of term *makar* which has been understood by Ghāzī Meḥmūd as implying that God is deceitful in His dealings with the enemies. According to Thanā'ullāh Amritsarī, it is improper to equate the term *makar* with deceit. The meanings described by him are that of a politician or statesman like Gladstone and Bismarck were. Amritsarī, *Turk-i Islām*, p.18.

[40] A good example of that can be seen in Thanā'ullāh Amritsarī's treatment of the issue of Jihad. According to Thanā'ullāh, Quran sanctions Jihad only in peculiar set of conditions. The Vedas on the other hand allow a free license to kill one's enemy. Hence, Quranic concept of war is more humane and reasonable. Ibid.. pp.156-7.

[41] This appeal was titled as *Gayān Parkāsh* and published in April 1914. Cf. *Al-Muslim*, 1915, pp.544-45.

[42] Muḥammad Ishaq Bhaṭṭī, *Qāzī Muḥammad Sulaymān Munṣūrpūrī*, (Lahore, 2007), pp.201-24. His new Muslim name was proposed as Ghāzī Meḥmūd and he was allowed to retain Dharampāl as part of his name since its meaning did not suggest any Hindu-specific connotation.

[43] Cited in *Ahl-i Ḥadīth* (Amritsar), 1st October 1915, p. 2.

[44] Cited in *Ahl-i Ḥadīth*, 13th February 1925, pp.1-2.

[45] *Ḥujjat ul-Islām* (Lahore, n.d.) by Maulvi 'Abdullāh Chakŕālavī was one of the many books written against Ghazi Meḥmūd Dharampāl. Some of the works written in response to Dharampāl and his works were: Ḥakīm Nūr ud-Dīn, *Nūr ud-Dīn bajavāb Tark-i Islām* (Amritsar, n.d.); Qāsim 'Alī Aḥmadī, *Ṣā'iqa-i Dhuljalāl bar Nakhal-i Dharampāl* (Delhi, 1909); Maulvī Nabī Bakhsh, *Tuzk-i Islām ba tardīd Tark-i Islām* (Wazirabad, ca. 1903); Maulvī Muḥammad Huẓūrul Ḥasnayn, *Risāla Takzīb-i Vēd va Taṣdīq-i Qur'ān bajavāb Tark-i Islām Dharampāl* (Muradabad, ca. 1904); Thanā'ullāh Amritsarī, *Risāla Taghlīb ul-Islām bar Tehzīb ul-Islām* (Amritsar, 1905).